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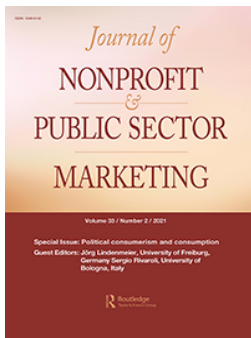
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Ethical Trade Communication as Mediation: Shifting the Focus of “Political Consumerism”

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual article proposes an approach to ethical consumption which is an alternative to “political consumerism”. By illuminating the aspects typically overlooked in political consumerism research, it re-embeds individualized ethical consumption in (1) the broader movement, (2) the communicative process, and (3) the social context. By adopting the notion of “ethical trade” it decenters individualized consumption as the exclusive way of enacting ethics in the marketplace, and by focusing on communication, it turns the spotlight away from individual consumers and onto organizations. Drawing extensively on communication studies, it is proposed that the main function of ethical trade organizations is to mediate between the geographically separated consumers and producers. Furthermore, greater sensitivity to the social context is introduced by distinguishing between two modes of mediation: “mediated familiarity” (the transmission of factual knowledge and the construction of affinity) and “moral education” (the subjectification of consumers who consider their impact on “distant others”).

KEYWORDS

Communication; ethical trade; mediated familiarity; mediation; moral education; political consumerism

Introduction

This conceptual article departs from the notion of “political consumerism”, which Micheletti (2003) canonically defines as “actions by *people* who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (p. 2; italics added). Instead, it culls from media and communication studies and the Foucauldian theory of subjectification to conceptualize how organizations might use communication to engage consumers with ethics in the global marketplace and make them support their cause. Following the aims of this special issue, in this article communication is explored as an antecedent of ethical consumption and attention is shifted from consumers to organizations as equally key actors in the movement.

While this article does not set out to criticize or devaluate the notion of political consumerism, especially as recent contributions have productively revisited and significantly advanced the concept (Boström et al., 2019), it intends to use the blind spots of political consumerism research productively as points of

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departure for developing an alternative approach. In doing so, three interrelated conceptual objectives are met in this article. Firstly, the article decenters the individualistic dimension of political consumerism/ethical consumption by zooming out on the “movement” composed not only of consumers but also producers as well as organizations that act in-between the two. Secondly, it extends the domain of politically/ethically motivated consumption beyond the focal dyad of boycott-buycott to incorporate meta-level practices, such as communication that precedes ethical choices. Thirdly, the article argues that the movement in question and its communication practices should never be abstracted from the surrounding social, economic, cultural and political circumstances (see Oosterveer et al., 2019). All in all, the aim of the article is to re-embed ethical consumer behavior conceptually in (1) the broader movement, (2) the communicative process, and (3) the societal context.

With all this in mind, in the article I have opted for the notion of “ethical trade”, rather than “political consumerism” because it reflects better the postulated embeddedness. Ethical trade encases a wide set of initiatives that are aimed at reconstructing global trade as a web of more just and equitable relationships (Hudson & Hudson, 2003; Raynolds & Bennett, 2015). These initiatives have to do with terms of exchange and conditions of production (including, but not limited to, fair trade; extraction of rare “conflict minerals” necessary for many electronic devices and obtainable only in conflict-ridden countries such as Congo; international trade agreements; and labor rights in the garment and footwear industries). But they also deal with other issues surrounding global trade, such as tax justice and environmental sustainability. Descriptively speaking, then, ethical trade is an attempt at ethical intervention in the global trade governance. Leaning on this definition, but also departing from it, I approach ethical trade as a trade that recognizes itself as a mediated relationship between people, and, as such, is a “defetishized” economic exchange governed by moral principles that usually apply to human relations (see Goodman, 2004; Herman, 2010; McEwan et al., 2017).

Thus formulated, ethical trade stops being merely a set of consumption-related practices and becomes a communication problem: it relies on a moral disposition that must be constructed through careful mediation by ethical trade organizations, rather than being intrinsic to some people and not to others. With this in mind, the focus here is on the role of ethical trade organizations as mediators between producers and consumers (see Touri, 2016). In doing so, the intention is to make a case for ethical trade communication as mediation by arguing that the success of ethical trade is contingent on the forming among the public of the attitudes that hinge on global imagination and the readiness for collective action. Thus, the article relies on a two-fold view of communication: (1) communication is an arena for constructing moral subjects; and, as such, (2) communication ought to bring distant people closer together, in both cognitive and moral terms (see Orgad, 2012).

In more detail, ethical trade communication as mediation between producers and consumers is viewed through a “Silverstonian” lens as an ethically charged communicative process through which the social values and meanings are constructed, negotiated and circulated (Silverstone, 1999, 2002, 2007). Within this conceptualization, this article is particularly interested in how ethical trade communication as mediation can function so as to construct consumers who consider the impact on distant others in making their everyday buying decisions (e.g., Barnett, Cafaro et al., 2005; Barnett, Cloke et al., 2005; Massey, 2006; Noddings, 1984). In addition to media and communication studies, this approach to communication as mediation is based on Foucault’s theory of subjectification (Foucault, 1982).

There are four parts to the remainder of this article that elaborate on the points introduced above. Firstly, it begins by re-embedding individualized ethical consumer behaviors in the context of the broader ethical trade movement by extending the concept of “individualized responsibility-taking” (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Secondly, it turns attention to communication as an often-necessary antecedent and catalyst of ethical consumer behaviors, including boycotts and buycotts (see Kelm & Dohle, 2018). To this end, ethical trade communication is conceptualized as mediation, drawing on the theory of mediation, literature on humanitarian communication, and the Foucauldian theory of subjectification. Thirdly, the article argues for situating ethical trade communication practices in the relevant social context and proposes analytically to distinguish between two modes of mediation – “mediated familiarity” and “moral education” – to account for the impact of social context on the possibilities and practices of ethical trade communication as mediation. Finally, the article teases out some conclusions and directions for future studies.

Zooming out on the movement

The first conceptual aim of this article, and thus the first pillar of the proposed approach to ethical trade, is to re-embed ethical consumer behavior in the context of the broader movement. To do so, this section critically elucidates the notion of individualized responsibility articulated in the concept of “political consumerism” (Micheletti, 2003). In political consumerism, political responsibility refers to “accountability for one’s attitudes and actions”, in which accountability stands for understanding the social consequences of individual choices as well as exercising due diligence in avoiding the negative repercussions of these choices (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013, p. 21). Consequently, political consumerism pushes political responsibility beyond the exclusive purview of governments and international authorities to implicate citizens who are expected to contribute to the alleviation of adverse effects of consumption through their choices in the marketplace (Lewis & Potter, 2011; Micheletti & Stolle, 2007). Stolle and Micheletti (2013, p. 21) propose a concept of “individualized responsibility-taking” to capture a “reasonable

individual choice involving considerations about the societal effects of one's actions". They appreciate the strong normativity embedded in the notion, which demands consumers exercise "reasonable choice" even when they are not legally obliged to do so, or when it involves compromising their own needs and lifestyles.

While political consumerism deserves credit for firmly locating the concept of responsibility in the moral landscape of trade and consumption, the conception of responsibility that it advocates is not without problems. Namely, it recalls the problematic notion of "responsibilization", whereby public issues are transferred to the realm of individual morality (Foucault, 1978/2003; see also Burchell, 1996). In other words, responsibilization privatizes public issues, and conditions individuals to assume personal responsibility for mitigating issues that have been collectively generated (MacTier, 2008; Maniates, 2002). Stolle and Micheletti (2013, p. 26) try to escape this trap (but fall right back into it) through formulating individualized responsibility-taking as an uncoordinated, "do-it-yourself" approach of acting on a private initiative, inevitably *outside* traditional public institutions (see Oosterveer et al., 2019). Consequently, governments and particularly commercial companies, which benefit from inequalities embedded in the structures of global trade, are absolved of responsibility, albeit implicitly. In addition, while focusing on the agency of consumers in the marketplace, the notion of individualized responsibility-taking overlooks the agency of producers as historical actors shaping their own lives (see Noxolo et al., 2012; Raghuram et al., 2009).

Contrary to the individualized and voluntaristic conception of responsibility proposed by political consumerism, the approach to ethical trade pursued here posits that Northern societies *as a whole* have a moral and political obligation to act on the predicament of distant producers (see Allen, 2008; Noxolo et al., 2012; Raghuram et al., 2009; Tomlinson, 1999). This notion resonates with Young's (2003, 2004, 2006) "social connection" model of responsibility, often evoked but not fully incorporated into Micheletti and colleagues' reflections on political consumerism (Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti & Stolle, 2008). In broad strokes, Young (2006) argues that because the actions of any one consumer cannot be disconnected from the mesh of unjust structures and processes of global trade, there is a personal responsibility that each consumer bears for trade inequality (see also Young, 2004). Unlike privatized responsibility, however, personal responsibility does not remove the collective dimension of the commitment. In fact, as Young (2003) observes, poor working conditions and violations of human rights commonly encountered in sweatshops in the Global South are not the fault of a single perpetrator, but the sum total of the doings of numerous individuals and institutions (see also Noxolo et al., 2012). Thus, the responsibility for righting the wrongs is also shared by multiple actors: international brands and corporations, global and national lawmakers, local factory owners, consumers and even producers/workers themselves (see Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2018). Accordingly, in

Young's (2004) view, the primary responsibility of consumers is not to resolve the injustice of global trade through their consumption choices, but to work toward amending the processes that generate and reproduce inequality.

All in all, Young's (2003, 2004, 2006) framing of responsibility clearly illuminates the need to re-embed individual consumers and their ethical consumption in the wider network of agents, some of whom are parties to the ethical trade movement. As such, this perspective on responsibility has a potentially encouraging and empowering cadence. It does not overwhelm consumers by putting the burden of addressing inequality exclusively on their shoulders, but instead locates them firmly in worldwide structures and implicates multiple actors in alleviating the situation. It offers a range of ways to participate in ethical trade, which exceed the realm of individual ethical consumption and are open not only to affluent individuals. It also brings to the fore political and collective actions (Oosterveer et al., 2019). In this configuration, consumers are expected to question the "normal" conditions of global trade to diagnose injustices to which they then respond according to the best of their abilities, preferably through collective action. To mobilize and coordinate consumers in seeking and enacting collective responsibility, ethical trade organizations are heavily reliant on communication, which is the topic of the next section.

Turning the spotlight on communication

The second aim of this article is to develop the approach to ethical trade via situating ethical consumer behaviors more firmly in the communicative context that surrounds them. Micheletti and Oral (2019, p. 699) enumerate the following four major forms of political consumerism: boycotts, buycotts, lifestyle change and "discursive actions". The last of these, formerly termed "discursive political consumerism", is defined as a *communicative* advocacy strategy targeted at corporate actors and critical of their policies and practices (Micheletti & Stolle, 2008, p. 753). Nonetheless, communication figures in the standard accounts of political consumerism merely in a vestigial form as an appendix to more strictly consumption-related behaviors (for an exception see Peretti & Micheletti, 2011). Moreover, political consumerism typically *signals*, but does not analyze in any detail, the role of "social movements" and "consumer-oriented networks" in mobilizing individuals and groups "in attempts to convince corporations to change their ways" (Micheletti & Oral, 2019, p. 699). In contrast to such approaches, in this article, I want to place organizations and their communication practices at the heart of ethical trade.

As mentioned above, in this article, communication is viewed from the perspective of the mediation theory. In media studies, mediation – enabled by the capacity of communication technologies to transmit mediated content across physical distances (Silverstone, 2008) – describes the role of media in

circulating meaning within and among societies (Silverstone, 1999). What is relevant here, however, is a less media-centric view of mediation. Silverstone (1999) captures this sentiment when he writes that to mediate is to create a sense of immediacy through communication, and to participate in mediation is to transcend time and space.

There are three reasons why it makes sense to approach mediation specifically through Silverstone's work in the context of ethical trade. Firstly, Silverstone (2002) emphasizes the role of everyday experiences in developing "an ethics of care and responsibility" (p. 761). While this approach originally accentuates the role of everyday encounters with mediated content in forming relationships with distant others and the world at large (Silverstone, 1999), it lends itself to the extension to the mundane micro-practices of consumption and shopping as a legitimate arena for the formation of moral attitudes. Secondly, Silverstone's take on mediation as composed of mundane and immediate experiences opens the door for bypassing institutionalized journalism and instead, concentrating on the role of mediators such as ethical trade organizations. These organizations tend to be more successful in using personal communication and commercial social media platforms, rather than traditional media institutions, to produce, curate and circulate content (Polynczuk-Alenius, 2018; Kelm & Dohle, 2018). In other words, Silverstone offers a view on mediation without the necessary presence of journalists or traditional media organizations. Thirdly, and crucially, Silverstonian mediation is not only a technology or a neutral transfer of information, but a process with a heavy ethical load (Silverstone, 1999; see also Carey, 2008). In fact, Silverstone goes as far as to argue that no ethics at all are possible without (mediated) communication.

According to Silverstone (1999, 2008), living in a globalized world means living in a mediated world. That is, a globalized world as a whole is hardly ever accessible through direct experience. Rather, we get to know distant peoples and places through mediated words, images and sounds that traverse geographical distance (Silverstone, 1999, 2007). In a world split into the hemispheres of wealth and scarcity, the concern with distance is primarily ethical (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2008). The imperative of communication as mediation is not only to overcome physical separation, but also to bridge social, cultural and, perhaps most importantly, moral distance in order to create a sense of meaningful proximity to distant others (Silverstone, 2004). For this dynamic, Silverstone (2007, p. 31) coined the notion of "mediapolis" in an attempt to capture mediated communication as an arena of the ongoing (re-)construction of the social world (see also Carey, 2008). Thus, mediation provides a space for mundane encounters and conversations that can connect one to distant others, their lived realities and claims (Silverstone, 1999). The concept of mediapolis highlights the performativity of mediation: although it is "the product of human agency", born out of the efforts of mediators, it nevertheless carries implications for the lives of distant others (Silverstone, 2008, p. 65). Against this background, mediation as an

ethically charged symbolic process refers to the construction, negotiation and circulation of social meanings, understandings and values in and through communication (Silverstone, 1999, 2002).

It is precisely this ethical imperative that justifies approaching ethical trade communication as mediation. Indeed, an “ethics” of ethical trade resides in its efforts to reestablish trade as an ethical relationship between producers and consumers on the foundation of a greater sensitivity to the rights and needs of distant producers. In the current configuration of global trade, producers often appear as distant strangers, located beyond the realm of the personal, experienced and directly knowable (Corbridge, 1993). One of key aims of ethical trade is to bring distant producers in the “Global South” and their predicament to the awareness of consumers through mediation (see Touri, 2016). This mediation is both very material (through the provision of products), and more symbolic, through systematically educating consumers about the injustices of global trade or through telling stories about producers (Barnett, Cloke et al., 2005). The focus here is primarily on the symbolic, i.e., communicative, aspect of mediation.

Given their clear ethical agenda, ethical trade organizations cannot adopt in their mediation an “impartial” stance. Contrary to the informed but neutral viewpoint that Silverstone (2008) recommends for media organizations, the success of ethical trade is dependent precisely upon the intellectual, emotional and moral investment of the audience-consumers. The following sub-section looks at the ontologico-methodological foundations that underpin the idea that communication qua mediation might have a bearing on how individuals perceive and act on the surrounding social reality, including on global trade arrangements.

Foucauldian discourse theory and communication as a construction of subjects

Methodologically, research on political consumerism tends to rely for data collection on survey questions centered on purchasing behaviors and for data analysis on quantitative methods (Stolle & Huissoud, 2019). Naturally, an approach of this kind is by default nearly blind to ethical consumption practices other than boycotts and buycotts as well as to the significance of communication therein (Kelm & Dohle, 2018). In contrast, the very opportunity for ethical trade communication qua mediation rests on the ontological assumption that communication can impact upon social reality and subjects that inhabit it. Here, the theory of mediation meets the Foucauldian discourse theory.

The understanding of discourse that this article refers to departs from its traditional, strictly linguistic meaning as “a mere intersection of things and words: an obscure web of things, and a manifest, visible, coloured chain of words” (Foucault, 1972, p. 48). Instead, discourse is a signifying “space” where meaning is continuously contested and renegotiated (Torfing, 1999, p. 85). More than simply representing material reality, discourses have a double capacity: they both meaningfully describe and constitute the world and its

subjects (Foucault, 1972). Thus, discourses are “practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49) that encompass a system of “thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices” (Lessa, 2006, p. 285). Put more simply, the basic ontological premise of discourse analysis is that the material “reality” obtains meaning through discourse, which in its turn, is open to change (see Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997). Discourse and materiality, therefore, construct the social world together. In acting on this ontology, Foucauldian discourse theory takes a keen interest in material circumstances and non-discursive practices with which discourses interact in co-constituting social reality, urging us always to consider communication in its broader context; the point which will be taken up again in the forthcoming section.

The view of communication as mediation draws particularly on Foucault’s theory of subjectification. Subjectification describes both the passive subordination of individuals to power and the active constitution of individuals as subjects (Foucault, 1982). These two meanings of subjectification correspond to two distinctive types of “technologies”: the technologies of power – often taken to mean the “pastoral” power over conduct, rather than force and coercion (Foucault, 1982) – and the techniques of the self (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008), respectively. Technologies of power are the domain of state and government, particularly in advanced liberalism (Burchell, 1996). The technologies of the self, succinctly put, refer to the practices undertaken by individuals to constitute themselves as ethical subjects working toward a broadly understood moral aim determined within a particular moral order (Foucault, 1982; see Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Therefore, a subject is more than just a product or resultant of the vectors of external power and domination (see Arribas-Ayllon, 2005).

At the level of discourses, and this is the level most significant for the present discussion, the Foucauldian theory of subjectification posits that every discourse produces a position for the subject from which the meaning and knowledge contained in this discourse makes the most sense (Foucault, 1982; Hall, 1997). According to Foucault (1982, p. 778), subjects are discursively produced through “dividing practices” whereby the subject is either split inside itself or separated from others. The “positioning of subjects within a discursive structure” is termed “subject position” (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007, p. 267). Subject positions are multiple, contradictory and discontinuous “locations” that emerge through and within power relations embedded in the discourse (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Foucault, 1982). The positions produced by discourses are contingent, not determined or determining (see Foucault, 1982). Although individuals are inclined to identify themselves with subject positions constructed by the discourse, they are not bound to do so (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; see also Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Foucault, 1982; Hall, 1997). Instead, there is an interplay between the performative power of discourses, (material) structures and the agency of subjects (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008;

Carpentier, 2017). Yet, there are material and discursive limits to individual self-constitution. Active agents as they are, individuals inevitably construct and perform their selves in relation to a situated material “reality”, on one hand (see Carpentier, 2017; Olssen, 2003) and the norms delineated and constituted by the discourses already in place, on the other (Butler, 2004; Davies, 1991).

With all this in mind, it is possible to imagine that ethical trade organizations can try discursively to influence how individuals constitute themselves as moral subjects within the framework of their everyday consumption (e.g., Miller, 2001; Wilk, 2001). At the basic level, ethical trade communication appears to constitute its recipients as “Northern consumers” structurally divided from (but morally connected to) “Southern producers”. The division between consumers and producers is often conceptualized as a form of an opposition between “haves” and “have-nots”, presupposing the moral obligations of the former toward the latter. Crucially, in exploring ethical trade communication, it is worth keeping in mind that in the Foucauldian approach to subjectification, the subjects addressed by discourses can reject the subject position offered to them.

Taking note of the context in ethical trade communication

The third aim with this article is to develop a theoretical approach to ethical trade communication as mediation by re-embedding ethical consumption practices in the surrounding social context (Oosterveer et al., 2019). In political consumerism, individual, responsabilized consumers tend to be located at the center. However, to do the same in research on ethical trade communication that rests on the theories of mediation and subjectification would mean to turn a blind eye to the significant aspect of communication as both a social and discursive process, which always happens in social contexts. This context is framed by widely conceived material conditions (see Trentmann, 2007) as well as discourses used to make sense of, and give meaning to, these material conditions.

Accordingly, while writing about mediation as an ethical practice, scholars typically note that representations of distant others and their predicament must be coherent with the “local moral horizons” in that they resonate with the knowledge and sentiments of the audience (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 179; see also Orgad, 2012; Silverstone, 2003). Only then are the spectators ready to answer to the “reality” behind representations (Silverstone, 2008). Of course, this argument can be extended beyond the representations of people and events to the representations of processes and causes, such as ethical trade. The imperative to consider the “local moral horizons” has been thus far overlooked in research on ethical trade. While the scant scholarship on ethical trade communication and marketing has focused on the moral obligations that ethical trade organizations have toward producers whose representations they circulate, it has hardly been acknowledged that the fulfillment of their duties toward producers hinges on the

accountability to consumers. That is, the consumers' response determines the level of support that producers receive, and consumers are more likely to respond to messages attuned to their surrounding social context.

Most generally, ethical trade organizations as mediators must create awareness communicatively and pass on the knowledge of distant producers and their predicament (Barnett, Cafaro et al., 2005; Barnett, Cloke et al., 2005; Goodman, 2004). To incorporate distant producers into the cognitive and moral landscape of consumers effectively, ethical trade organizations must reconstruct the fragmented, globalized world in such a way that the intricate connections between faraway locales are emphasized (see Raghuram et al., 2009). Although such links are part and parcel of the everyday circuits of production, trade, shopping and consumption, they often remain obscure to consumers (Clarke et al., 2007). Hence, the aim of ethical trade communication is to bring to light the interdependence between Northern lifestyles and consumption habits, and the world of distant sweatshops and remote coffee farms.

Depending on the surrounding context, this mediation task can be carried out in at least two modes: "mediated familiarity" and "moral education" (for in-depth analyses of two representative empirical cases, see Polynczuk-Alenius, 2018). Both these levels are crucial for the construction of a mediated ethical relationship between producers and consumers. The division is primarily analytical as in the actual process of mediation, mediated familiarity and moral education are closely intertwined. The merit of this distinction, however, lies in the fact that it introduces greater tonality into ethical trade communication and anticipates the responsiveness of ethical trade communication to the social context in which it is carried out. That is, mediated familiarity is better suited to the societies in which consumption-related social and environmental problems are not yet widely acknowledged and ethical trade is not yet a well-known phenomenon, such as in new consumer societies. On the other hand, moral education is possible in the societies that are well-to-do, have a sufficiently long consumerist record, which has sensitized them to the problems generated by excessive consumption, and are informed about the alternatives. In other words, practices and strategies of ethical trade communication are context-dependent and can be mapped onto a spectrum that stretches between raising awareness and shaping moral dispositions. While the main characteristics of each mode of mediation are summarized and juxtaposed in Table 1, the sub-sections that follow will look at mediated familiarity and moral education in more detail.

Mediated familiarity in ethical trade communication

Mediated familiarity describes a connection to distant others, based primarily on factual knowledge and acknowledgment of affinity (see Chouliarakis, 2006; Tomlinson, 1999). To put it another way, mediated familiarity has to do with the provision of information by ethical trade organizations about Southern

Table 1. The main features of mediated familiarity and moral education as two distinctive modes of ethical trade communication as mediation.

	Mediated familiarity	Moral education
Goal	Awareness-raising	Shaping moral disposition
Tools	Knowledge and information	Meta-representations
Level of affinity	Cognitive	Moral
Subjects of affinity	Southern producers as a distinct “class” of people	Generalized “distant others”
Suggested action	Consumption of ethical products	Extra-consumerist “collective action at a distance”

producers and their lived realities in a bid to “shorten the distance” between consumers and producers (see Caruana, 2007; Hudson & Hudson, 2003; Shreck, 2005). As such, mediated familiarity is constructed primarily by means of representation (see Sturken, 2011), be it through portrayals of individual producers or collective renderings of Southern producers as a “class” of people (see Lekakis, 2013). The asymmetrical character of mediation, and perhaps of communication in general, permits familiarity that is primarily unidirectional (see Ahmed, 2000). In other words, Northern consumers can learn about Southern producers whose opportunities to reciprocate are limited, not least because of the generally more constricted access to media technologies and institutions (see Dolan, 2007; Wright, 2004).

Similar mediated and unidirectional relationships are sometimes theorized as “intimacy at a distance”. In the same vein, Orgad and Seu (2014, p. 917) talk about intimacy at a distance as “a mediated . . . mostly non-reciprocal bonding with faraway others”. Intimacy at a distance, however, is not an affirmative concept. Rather, it is used in humanitarian communication to criticize standardized representations of distant others that endorse emotional responses that privilege the “giving” self over the suffering others (Orgad & Seu, 2014).

In contrast, the mediated familiarity sought after in ethical trade communication tries to escape the traps of voyeurism and objectification that lurk behind the practice, common in humanitarian communication, of exposing vulnerable bodies through privacy invasion. These risks are fended off in two interrelated moves. Firstly, ethical trade concentrates on the plight of Southern producers in their working lives, and not on their private hardships (see Adams & Raisborough, 2008). Secondly, mediated familiarity has as its purpose raising awareness and the dissemination of knowledge, not the triggering of emotional or sentimental responses. Thus, founded on knowledge and information, mediated familiarity is a cognitive state rather than a moral disposition (see Caruana, 2007).

Moral education in ethical trade communication

Ideally, mediated familiarity should be wrapped in a symbolic normative layer that would enable the awakening in the society of strong sentiments of

empathy and identification (e.g., Hudson & Hudson, 2003). At the end of the day, the goal of ethical trade communication is not to objectively inform, but to morally educate consumers, that is, to shape ethical attitudes and moral dispositions that are then channeled into consumption-related behaviors. In this article I borrow the concept of “moral education” from humanitarian communication to emphasize the ethical obligation of ethical trade organizations as mediators to cultivate cosmopolitan attitudes among the public.

Moral education insists on recognizing distant others as “equally deserving” of compassion and global justice (Arthurs, 2012, p. 144). By continuously representing to the public the distant world and its peoples, mediated content can serve to form and nurture the symbolic relationships between audiences and distant others that hinge on a cosmopolitan sensibility and global imagination (Chouliaraki, 2006; Orgad, 2012; Silverstone, 2007). Chouliaraki (2006, 2008) posits that through the reiteration of moral discourses, mediated stories not only illustrate misfortunes in the lives of distant others, but also promote ethical values and cultivate moral agency and cosmopolitan disposition among the public. For example, they may sensitize audiences to the harms that they might inflict on distant others, be it consciously or not (Linklater, 2007). Moreover, images of and information about distant contexts might incite new forms of collective “action at a distance” that overcome physical separation (Thompson, 1995, p. 100).

Participation in ethical trade might be one of such collective actions at the distance. Thus, in a bid to construct consumers who consider the impact on faraway producers and workers when making everyday buying decisions (e.g., Adams & Raisborough, 2010; Barnett, Cloke et al., 2005; Goodman, 2004; Massey, 2006), moral education moves beyond the cognitive level of mediated familiarity to advocate a deepened moral commitment. However, it builds on mediated familiarity in achieving symbolic recognition of the faces, bodies and predicaments of Southern producers. Moral education operates on the level of “meta-representations”, whereby a moral disposition is constructed in relation to the *generalized* distant others whose condition is cast within the context of “universal” moral values and discourses (Silverstone, 2004).

In tangible terms, ethical trade organizations as mediators have an obligation communicatively to represent producers, their predicament and the cause itself as worthy of consumers’ attention and action (see Chouliaraki, 2006; Silverstone, 2002, 2007). This task is even more pressing as it involves reworking the instinctive human attitude in which the personal difficulties and needs of significant and proximate others usually take precedence over remote predicaments and vulnerabilities, no matter how dire (Corbridge, 1993; Linklater, 2007). In the absence of direct connections and access to distant producers, which can be moderated to an extent through knowledge and information, consumers are unlikely to be concerned about the processes and contexts in which the goods that they purchase were produced (Hudson

& Hudson, 2003). Moreover, the issue of work exploitation might not mobilize relatively affluent consumers who cannot personally relate to this experience (Allen, 2008). Albeit strenuous, the construction of empathy and identification is the crux of ethical trade communication as moral education: only when included in consumers' moral universe will distant producers be embraced in the bonds of moral obligations that are typically viewed to organize communities and societies (Tomlinson, 1999).

Conclusion

The present article plugged into the aims of this special issue by exploring communication as a catalyst for ethical consumption and by shifting attention from consumers to organizations as equally key actors in the movement. To do so, it developed the concept of ethical trade reliant on communication as an alternative approach to how ethics can be enacted in the global marketplace. It used the notion of “political consumerism” (Micheletti, 2003) as a handy point of departure for this endeavor. The key differences between the two approaches are summarized in Table 2.

By illuminating the three blind spots of the canonical accounts of political consumerism, in this article I sought to elaborate the concept of ethical trade communication as an approach that re-embeds individualized ethical consumption in (1) the broader movement, (2) the communicative process, and (3) the social context. Firstly, the article proposed to look beyond individual consumers and their consumption behaviors and to substitute the concept of personalized “responsibility-taking” (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013) with the “social connection” model of responsibility (Young, 2003, 2004, 2006). This framing of responsibility incorporated a wider network of actors, some of whom form the broader ethical trade movement, thereby highlighting the key

Table 2. The main differences between the canonical version of political consumerism and the approach to ethical trade developed in this article.

	Political consumerism	Ethical trade
Conception of responsibility	Individualized responsibility-taking (focus on individual consumers acting outside traditional political institutions)	“Social connection” model of responsibility (responsibility distributed and enacted together; consumers embedded in a network – movement – of actors)
Key actions and activities	Individual consumption choices, predominantly boycott and buycott	Communication as mediation, whereby a mediated relationship is constructed by ethical trade organizations between spatially separated producers and consumers
Approach to context	Individuals and their purchasing decisions quantified and largely abstracted from the social context	Individual consumers as well as communication practices used to reach them firmly located in the surrounding context (the latter reflected in the differentiation between two modes of mediation: “mediated familiarity” and “moral education”)

role of organizations. The realm of ethical consumer behaviors was also extended beyond the much-studied practices of boycotting and boycotting.

Secondly and relatedly, the article accentuated the significance of communication as a meta-level practice that often precedes consumer choices at the point of sale and involvement with the cause more generally. In particular, it focused on ethical trade organizations, maintaining that their communication practices are crucial for the formation and mobilization of ethical consumers. Accordingly, the conceptualization of ethical trade communication as mediation was introduced in this article, whereby the role of organizations as mediators was to engage consumers with the predicament of distant producers. Theoretically, this conceptualization brought together the scholarship on humanitarian communication – as communication oriented toward forming certain moral attitudes in the public – and Foucault’s theory of subjectification, which ontologically posits that subjects can indeed be discursively constructed.

Thirdly, the article argued that communication practices of ethical trade communication, as well as their potential consequences, should always be considered in the social context to which they respond. In this article I sought to distinguish analytically between “mediated familiarity” and “moral education”, to account theoretically for those two possible modes of mediation. While the former describes the transmission of factual knowledge and the construction of cognitive affinity with Southern producers as a specific group of people, the latter highlights the formation of moral dispositions toward generalized distant others.

The theoretical approach offered in this article definitely invites empirical research on ethical trade communication. Admittedly, there is a body of literature concerned with the marketing and advertising of ethical products, focusing in particular on critical readings of representations deployed in not very recent fair-trade campaigns (e.g., Adams & Raisborough, 2008, 2010; Goodman, 2004; Wright, 2004). Valuable as these critical studies are, they very often focus on content, i.e. representations and narratives, and generally ignore the context in which they are produced and received. Conversely, the role of ethical trade organizations that transcends the provision and branding of products and positions them instead as mediators between producers and consumers, tends to be seen only as emerging (Touri, 2016). Accordingly, the accounts that focus on ethical trade communication are rare and rather dated (Balsiger, 2010; Dolan, 2005, 2007; McDonagh, 2002; Nicholls, 2002; Wright & Heaton, 2006).

At the same time, as Perez and Del Mar García de Los Salomones (2018, p. 112) remark, organizations in ethical product markets “still have a long way to go in improving their marketing strategies”. In the light of this claim, the present article provided a conceptual framework which can be deployed to investigate the communication practices of ethical trade organizations and understand better why they might fail to mitigate the “attitude-behavior gap”, which inhibits the purchase of ethical products (Perez & Del Mar García de Los Salomones, 2018, p. 112). Such studies could also suggest potential

avenues of improvements, particularly in terms of the resonance of ethical trade messages and strategies with their local contexts.

Finally, while concentrating on ethical trade organizations and their communication, this article also had something to say about consumers. Namely, it signaled the opportunity to study ethical consumers as more than a sum of their individual economic behaviors and consumption choices, or passive targets of information campaigns and awareness raising (Oosterveer et al., 2019), and to approach them as moral agents instead. On that note, conducting a larger qualitative study focusing on consumers and their moral deliberation – including interviews, shopping trips and reflexive diaries – would allow for the actual efficacy of ethical trade communication as moral education to be explored.

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